for Human Rights, Democracy
& Development in Burma

Statement before the United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations

“The State of Democracy Around The World”

A Testimony By:

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Thank you members of this committee for offering me an opportunity to testify.

When Min Aung Hlaing, the head of the Burmese military, held the coup on 1st February, he knew there would be a price to pay. He calculated the price would not be too high and that it would be a price worth paying.

It is essential that we prove his calculations wrong. We have to make the price higher than he expected.

In Burma the people have already done that. The military thought that by arresting NLD leaders, and leaders of the uprising in 1988, including my father, that they could stop protests.

Instead, there have been the biggest protests in more than 30 years. There is a mass civil disobedience movement, general strikes, and boycotts of military companies. There is amazing creativity as people find different ways to resist military rule. Communities are coming together to support each other.

But peaceful protest has been met by increasing violence by the military. People are dying on the streets. Children have been shot in the head after joining protests for the first time in their lives.

They are holding signs calling for democracy. And the signs are in English because they want the world to help.

More than 60 people have been killed. All unarmed civilians. At least two of those killed were tortured to death after being arrested.

The same soldiers who have been attacking and killing civilians in Shan State, Kachin State and Rakhine State, the same soldiers who committed genocide against the Rohingya, are now on the streets of the cities in central Burma.

They beat children just for watching protests, they loot and they kill. They are there to instil fear and terror and make people too scared to resist military dictatorship.

Since the coup, around 2,000 people have been arrested or are facing charges. The figure is likely to be much higher as we don't know how many are being arrested in more remote areas of ethnic states. We don't know how many people have simply disappeared.

For the families of those like my father who have been kept in detention, we also don't know what has happened to them. We have not been told where they are. They have not been allowed to see lawyers. We don't know if my father and other prisoners with serious medical conditions are getting the medication which they need to keep them alive.

For almost half my life my father had been in prison for supporting human rights. Today is his birthday and it's the 14th time we are unable to celebrate together because he is in jail. It is very hard for me even though I am used to it. I grew up with my father in jail for his political activities. My first memory of my father is seeing him through the bars of a jail cell.

I am heartbroken and angry at the same time that so many children will now have to go through what I went through, growing up without a parent, not knowing if or when they will ever be freed. This has to stop. Decade after decade, generation after generation. It never stops.

Even under Aung San Suu Kyi's government there were more than 200 political prisoners. 200 families torn apart because the government and military would not tolerate people asking for their human rights and full democracy.

The United States is right to demand the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, the President and arrested MPs. But it is equally important to free the teenager in Myitkyina, the mother in Lashio, the shopkeeper in Myawaddy, and the student in Loikaw.

The hundreds of people whose names are not known, who live in places most people have never heard of, but who risked death and jail to try to free their country. They are true heroes. We cannot again have a situation where the pressure is relaxed when the high profile political prisoners are freed. Never again should any political prisoner be left behind in Burma's jails.

At the same time as locking up those calling for human rights and democracy, faced with overwhelming public rejection of his justification for the coup, Min Aung Hlaing has freed well known racist nationalist prisoners from jail. People who incited, organised or took part in ethnic cleansing and genocide against the Rohingya and who incited and organised anti-Muslim riots.

There is a very real danger Min Aung Hlaing will play the nationalist anti-Rohingya and anti-Muslim card to try to deflect attention from the coup. Already we have seen Muslim political leaders targeted and killed. There are millions of Muslims in Burma and more than half a million Rohingya left in Rakhine State. Since 2012 we have repeatedly seen how the military tries to whip up anti-Muslim and anti-Rohingya sentiment to try to win public support. There is a very real danger the military will do the same again now.

It is not just in the cities and against peaceful protesters that the military is attacking civilians. In Karen State, where there is supposed to be a ceasefire, the Burmese military have been firing mortar bombs into villages and fields and threatening to use villagers as slave labour to carry their equipment. New soldiers and convoys of trucks of equipment are arriving. Already more than 5,000 villagers are now hiding in the jungle.

The armoured trucks and soldiers on the streets of cities that we see today never left the streets in many ethnic areas.

In the past ten years of the reform process, human rights violations against ethnic minorities in my country have increased. During the peace process, conflict has increased.

Since the reforms began ten years ago, hundreds of thousands of people from ethnic minorities have had to flee conflict and human rights violations. Many are still living in squalid camps without proper shelter, food, medical care and education for their children.

They didn't see any gains in the past ten years.

One protester in Kachin state told me: "It's great to see the world is finally paying attention to Burma again and starting to understand how ruthless the Burmese army is, but I hope they will still stand with us and not ignore the suffering of our ethnic people even after Aung San Suu Kyi is released."

The military saw sanctions relaxed, offers of military engagement and training and international companies working with their military companies, even as they carried on with the same human rights violations against ethnic minorities.

This created a sense of impunity for the military. They think they can get away with it. So they commit more crimes.

They even thought they could get away with genocide of the Rohingya, and so far they have.

A UN Fact-Finding Mission found that what took place against the Rohingya in 2017 was genocide and crimes against humanity.

In 2019 Min Aung Hlaing, the head of the military, was sanctioned by the United States. He was designated for his role in atrocities. But he and the other generals sanctioned had no assets in the United States to freeze. No further action took place following the designation. So all that was left was a visa ban.

The only United States sanction the Burmese military faced for committing genocide was that some of their soldiers were banned from taking holidays in the United States.

Having just been allowed to get away with genocide, of course Min Aung Hlaing thinks you will also let him get away with the military coup. For the sake of my country, you must prove him wrong.

If you look at the signs of the protesters on the streets, they don't want to go back to how things were before the coup.

It was an unacceptable situation with too many people, especially ethnic and religious minorities, not only left behind but suffering increased repression and human rights violations.

People want the coup reversed and the democratically elected government reinstated, but they do not want to go back to the military drafted 2008 Constitution.

They don't want to go back to a situation where the military commits genocide and is defended by the government.

In the United States you would not accept a situation where your Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff chose three members of the cabinet and controlled every police force in the country.

You would not accept him setting his own budget.

You would not accept him choosing twenty-five percent of the members of congress.

You would not accept it, and nor do we.

Protesters risking their lives on the streets are calling for a federal democracy, like you have.

Min Aung Hlaing has been proved wrong in his calculations that he could stop protests and resistance by the people of Burma.

But so far he has not been proved wrong in his calculations that the response of the international community would be weak.

Statements are important and welcome, but they are ignored repeatedly by the generals. They expect it. They are military men. They are not diplomats. They respect strength and action.

We are realistic. We know that international action alone will not free our country. We will win our own freedom but international action has a critical role to play.

When we call for sanctions, we are not just making a plea for help.

We are calling on you to stop helping the military which oppresses us.

Almost every weapon and every item of military equipment and technology the Burmese military have comes from other countries or is based on technology from other countries.

Every military company has been created using finance, technology and equipment from overseas.

The military in my country is not isolationist. It has been built and financed with international support.

The United States has always been at the forefront of international action to support human rights and democracy in my country. We are grateful for that.

But today American companies are working for military owned companies. American companies help the military promote their company products which help pay for their guns and their bullets. American companies are channelling millions of dollars to the military.

I want to thank the United States for being the first to act after the coup, freezing government reserves and sanctioning three military companies.

There is much more the United States can and must do.

The military are not the legal government of my country and the American government must not accept them as such. They have no legitimacy and must not be recognised by the United States. We have elected MPs and they have formed a Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw. They have the elected mandate from the people. The military do not.

You must target the economic interests of the military. Sanctions on military companies, including their conglomerates, Myanmar Economic Corporation and Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings.

These sanctions must include services. Banking and finance. Consultancy and legal services. Insurance and reinsurance.

Now that the military control the government, revenues to them from oil and gas need to be stopped. This should happen not by Chevron, Total and others pulling out, or shutting down the flow of oil and gas. That would leave many people in Burma and Thailand literally in the dark. Instead, international companies should be asked to stop all revenue and royalty payments. If they refuse, sanctions and anti-money laundering laws should be used to stop this revenue flow.

Timber and gems will also be big revenue earners for the military. The United States should sanction these sectors, barring imports whether they come directly or via third party countries.

At the same time, we don't want to see more general trade sanctions like removing trade privileges or a complete ban on imports from Burma. This will hurt ordinary people too much. We need smart and targeted economic sanctions.

The United States has an arms embargo, along with 40 other countries. That means 151 countries do not have an arms embargo or policies to prevent the sale of equipment to the military, or equipment and technology which can be used for repression.

You are the most influential country in the world. Please use that influence to work with allies like the UK to build a global coalition of countries imposing arms embargoes. In this way, regardless of China's veto at the UN Security Council, you can make progress towards a global arms embargo.

There are like-minded countries such as the UK, Canada and members of the European Union. Please work with them to coordinate targeted sanctions and where necessary, show leadership and drag them along behind you.

You have strong relationships with Japan and Singapore, countries which play a key role in the economic and political fortunes of the military. Please reach out to them.

Financial assistance to civil society organisations documenting human rights violations and working for democracy will be even more important now.

Victims of human rights violations by the Burmese military must also be a priority for humanitarian aid. Internally displaced people, the vast majority from ethnic minorities, have never received enough aid for shelter, food, medicines and education. They should be first in line for American aid. Refugees in camps in Thailand and Bangladesh are also living in unacceptable conditions without the support they need. Conditions which also make them especially vulnerable to COVID-19.

There is no shortage of measures which the United States can take, diplomatic, economic, humanitarian and legal. All that is needed is the political will.

By themselves some of these measures may seem small, but combined they will have an impact.

Your leadership in taking these measures will be encouraging others to do the same, multiplying your impact.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu has long supported our campaign and he once told us, everything that can be done must be done. If you haven't done everything you can, you haven't done enough.

On the streets in my country, young people come back onto the streets day after day despite knowing they could be shot. They put stickers on their phones with their blood type in case they are injured, and they put names of next of kin in case they are killed. They are doing everything they can.

We are asking you to do everything you can to help people in Burma.

Thank you.